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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by World Young Women's Christian Association, Young Women's Christian Association of Nigeria and YWCA of Canada, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The World Young Women's Christian Association (World YWCA) movement represents the voices of the 25 million women, young women and girls who are Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) members and service users in 108 countries worldwide, many living in rural communities. We recognize the role played by rural women in poverty eradication, development and climate justice, and are strongly committed to the empowerment of rural women, which is critical to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and lies at the heart of community-based organizations such as the YWCA.

Access to education for girls in rural areas lags behind that for boys. Without adequate education, women remain behind men in employment, income, promotions and pensions, perpetuating gender inequality throughout the life cycle. Without education, women are less likely to be aware of their rights and their self-worth and are more vulnerable to rights violations. We call upon the Commission on the Status of Women to promote increased investment in education for girls, more qualified teachers in rural communities and measures to ensure that girls stay in school so as to reach their full potential.

For every year a girl remains in school, she avoids early marriage, which affects millions of girls worldwide. It is estimated that every day, more than 25,000 girls under the age of 18 are married. Girls from rural communities face increased vulnerability, particularly as legislation against child marriage is difficult to enforce in these areas, legal rights awareness is low and traditional practices prevail. Child marriage is a human rights violation that impedes development and directly prevents the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical issues for women and young women living in rural areas. In the absence of adequate infrastructure, education, trained professionals, facilities, medication and transportation, thousands of women die each year due to violations of their sexual and reproductive rights. In line with the Millennium Development Goals, the Commission must prioritize increased investment in basic health services in rural communities to prevent these violations. Health education, including comprehensive information about sexual and reproductive health and HIV, is an essential component of the empowerment of rural women and is necessary for the prevention of HIV infection. High levels of stigma in rural communities result in the denial of the sexual and reproductive rights of women living with HIV. YWCAs also express concern over the effects of nuclear radiation in rural areas on women and girls' sexual and reproductive rights, including gene damage, cancer and birth defects.

Violence against women comes in many forms and is represented in both the public and private spheres. Rural women and girls face increased vulnerability to violence due to isolation and a lack of support services, employment and access to education. Violence against rural indigenous women is of particular concern. This group not only lacks access to economic and social resources, but their security is at increased risk owing to isolation and the lack of police presence, including in developed countries. It is important for the Commission to respond to violence as it affects the lives of women in rural communities by ensuring legislation is in place to prevent violence against women in all its forms, as well as by promoting increased awareness and community engagement in ending violence in rural communities.

Women in rural communities often experience conflict in a more traumatic manner than men. In jungle areas or remote villages, there is little protection for women during the outbreak of conflict. Internal displacement also exposes women and girls to greater vulnerability to sexual abuse, harassment and violence in refugee camps where there are inadequate protections and poor living conditions. War results in many women being widowed, and households headed by women in remote areas are also more vulnerable to exploitation and sexual abuse.

Rural women can play a vital role in the prevention of conflict as community leaders trained to build peace in vulnerable situations, ease ethnic tensions and avoid the outbreak of conflict. Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) is an essential tool for the international community to ensure women are included in peace processes; however, local implementation is needed. The Commission needs to propose mechanisms to meet the requirements of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) and ensure the financial and technical resources needed to guarantee that the needs of women are addressed in peace negotiations and that their leadership is integral to these processes.

World YWCA emphasizes the importance of volunteer-based organizations in rural areas, which have vast knowledge of local needs and are based in the community. Volunteer organizations fill the void left by inadequate government funding and infrastructure in rural areas, providing local women with essential services from education to access to basic health care. Especially in rural areas, where facilities are insufficient to meet the needs of isolated women, volunteer services are essential to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and should be recognized.

Every day, rural women and girls face issues that occur as a result of institutionalized discrimination and lack of empowerment. Through targeted and sustained investment, many issues facing rural women could be tackled. The Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved without the input and participation of rural women who are vital to development issues such as food security, climate justice, peacebuilding and the economic security of families and communities.

The possibility of rural women claiming their rights and leading community change is inextricably linked to financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Recognizing that rural women are faced with many challenges to their rights and well-being, and that women are at the heart of the sustainable development process, YWCAs call on the Commission on the Status of Women to recognize the vital role of leadership and political participation by women and young women in the eradication of poverty in rural communities and encourage investment in policies, programmes and organizations that develop value and make visible women's, particularly young women's, leadership in rural communities. In particular, we encourage initiatives that promote women's leadership in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and environmental protection in rural communities. Specific recommendations include:

1. Increase funding and access to education and training for women and girls in rural areas in order to decrease the disproportionate levels of illiteracy and economic insecurity, and follow through on the commitments of the Beijing Platform for Action.

2. Develop and fund policies and programmes to support access for rural women and young women to obtain decent work, diversified employment options and economic participation as a means of decreasing women's poverty and supporting women-led development in rural communities. This includes access to drought assistance, agricultural resources and income, land ownership, land inheritance rights and environmental education.

3. Ensure that responses to the global economic downturn address the disproportionate impact on women and girls in rural areas, particularly in the context of access to health, employment, education and community services.

4. Prioritize increased investment in health spending for women, young women and girls in rural areas to ensure realization of the right to health, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights. Responding to the prevalence of HIV among rural women with free, voluntary testing and support services and access to treatment is essential, as is preventing thousands of unnecessary deaths each year due to the absence of maternity health care in rural areas.

5. Scale up investment to tackle violence against women, young women and girls in rural areas, which infringes on empowerment and undermines human rights. We call for the resourcing of programmes, including violence prevention, rights education and legal aid, that are responsive to the vulnerabilities of rural women. Safe houses are also required in rural communities for women, young women and girls escaping violence.

6. Promote legislation and law enforcement to criminalize child marriage, invest in programmes that engage with cultural norms that allow the continuation of harmful practices against girls in rural areas and ensure that disaggregated data on births in rural and urban areas is collected.

7. Ensure that royalties and economic benefits that flow from mining and extractive industries in rural communities are equally distributed between women and men, including equal employment in these sectors. Recognize that mining and extractive industries can have harmful impacts on women's access to housing, food security, community services, the environment and infrastructure in rural areas, and develop mitigation strategies.

8. Harness the potential of emerging technologies to reduce social isolation among women in rural areas and improve access to health services, training and education opportunities, invest in the skills and leadership of rural young women and embrace the application of new technologies as a mechanism for empowerment and poverty reduction.